

Hip-Hop Hopes

Written by Margaret McGladery ID2716
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Hip-Hop Hopes: Street-bred music brings a message of hope and activism to college campuses
by Margaret McGladery

Nerves ran high for student performers at the Bistro, a coffee shop on the campus of Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. For this spoken-word show, the performers had to put aside their anxiety, take the microphone, and deliver their own hip-hop lyrics to the twenty latte-sipping audience members who had shown up that afternoon in spring 2005. A dozen student performers shuffled through their notes, mouthing the lyrics they had written as a final assignment for English 242: The Essay: Writing Hip-Hop. Show organizer Tristan Lockhart took the mic first and launched into the first verse of his piece. But Lockhart's words fell on deaf ears. His audience didn't seem to notice that the show had started — only a few bothered to close laptops, put away books, or lower the volume of their conversation and listen. If they had, the audience would have tuned into what could be the next big trend on campus and in the country.

Although he was disappointed by his audience's apathy, Lockhart wasn't surprised. Willamette is a private liberal arts college of only 2,000 students, and the junior from Tacoma, Washington, knows that most of his upper middle-class peers don't understand what he means when he says, "Hip-hop is my home, my lifestyle. Hip-hop is me." Friends have difficulty getting Lockhart's attention when they meet him on campus because he never goes anywhere without his iPod. "All I listen to on my iPod is hip-hop. It keeps me sane," he says. The sound of hip-hop in his ears reminds Lockhart of home. Growing up a half-hour drive from Seattle, a major West Coast artistic and musical hub, Lockhart had access to all the city's cultural scene has to offer. The greater Puget Sound area, including Tacoma and Seattle, is home to almost four million people and has one of the nation's highest percentages of multiracial ancestry, attracting a huge immigrant population from all over the world.

Coming to Willamette from such a diverse hometown, Lockhart connects in particular to an increasingly popular hip-hop subgenre called conscious hip-hop. From suburban college campuses to downtown urban dance clubs, conscious hip-hop artists are attracting new audiences with socially aware lyrics that offer critical insight on race relations and economic justice in America. Reggie Legend, an energetic young poet and social commentator for AllHipHop.com, says that conscious hip-hop is helping break down the presumption among young people that their futures are predetermined by race or cultural background.

"Hip-hop goes beyond color and culture because poverty and lack of education hampers all low-income families across the board. We say black and white when talking about hip-hop

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audiences because it's easy to put that sort of label on it," Legend says, "but if we really want to get honest with ourselves, we have to be specific. It's much broader than white and black." In a society whose citizens are increasingly divided by differences in economic opportunity, political perspectives, and racial identifications, fans find common ground in conscious hip-hop.

A packed audience of conscious hip-hop fans takes in the Conscious Overdose show at Willamette University.

As any American who has flipped on the radio or MTV during the last decade has heard, hip-hop dominates pop music. Hip-hop and urban music are the fastest-growing genres in a \$13.2 billion a year industry. Artists and labels such as 50 Cent and Death Row Records lead in sales with "gangsta rap" — a hardcore brand of hip-hop infamous for its lyrical focus on the lifestyles of inner-city thugs — which has become a stereotype of black culture and hip-hop music.

Conscious hip-hop does not fit this description. Rappers such as Common (Sense), Mos Def, Talib Kweli, Dead Prez, The Roots, and Guru are using beats and rhymes to take on the major problems of life in urban America: political, economic, and racial injustice. Hip-hop music originally emerged from neighborhood block parties in New York City in the 1970s where rappers/DJs played soul, disco, and funk songs and improvised on their rhythms, either with their voices or their turntables. By the 1980s, hip-hop's infectious lyrics and beats had spread from the United States to become part of the music scene in dozens of countries. The roots of conscious hip-hop date back to the 1987 debut of Public Enemy and the wave of militant politicized MCs the group inspired to incorporate messages of social awareness in hip-hop music. The first gangsta rappers also appeared on the scene at this time with N.W.A.'s 1988 debut *Straight Outta Compton*, the album known for its controversial single "@#%\$ tha Police." By the 1990s, conscious hip-hop was referred to as "alternative hip-hop" because it had been crowded out of mainstream pop music by the more visible, commercially powerful gangsta hip-hop.

But fans and critics are starting to talk about this alternative take on hip-hop, putting it on the radar of pop culture and in the studies of American academia. At Willamette, students in the Writing Hip-Hop class spent their spring 2005 semester studying conscious hip-hop with assistant professor Thabiti Lewis. In a small lecture hall on the first day of class, students glanced around, unsure of what to expect from the newly designed course. But when Lewis strode to the lectern, the intense focus in his eyes commanded his students' riveted attention. Lewis assigned students to read *The Hip Hop Generation*, a study of the generation of black Americans born between 1965 and 1984, written by Bakari Kitwana, a friend and colleague of

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Lewis. In the book, Kitwana argues that the hip-hop sector of the music industry could be the platform for an inclusive political movement based on the issues he considers most important to the hip-hop generation: education reform, employment rights, rebuilding urban infrastructures, healthcare, and justice system reforms.

A b-boy busts a move at the Conscious Overdose show at Willamette's Cone Field House.

Kitwana's themes resonate throughout the lyrics of conscious hip-hop artists such as Talib Kweli. Kweli collaborates with Mos Def on their Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star album, calling on the hip-hop generation to pay attention:

We either niggaz or Kings/

We either bitches or Queens/

The length of black life is treated with short worth... /

Not strong, only aggressive, cause the power ain't directed/

That's why we are subjected to the will of the oppressive/

— “Thieves in the Night”

Kweli's lyrics demand that listeners recognize uncomfortable racial stereotypes and reject them, fearlessly advocating for a more positive and empowered identity for black Americans than gangsta rap typically presents.

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Lyrics like these captivated student Austin Buell, who says that conscious hip-hop opened his eyes to issues he had never encountered in his predominately white, middle-class hometown, Ashland, Oregon. "There are still problems after the civil rights movement. They're almost insurmountable issues because the problems are so subtle and dangerous," Buell says. In racially and economically homogenous suburban areas like Buell's hometown, these are issues are not readily discussed. "That's why there's the need for more kinds of hip-hop. If some guy came out on the radio and said, 'I do the same job as you for half the income,' and white, affluent kids actually heard that and understood what was going on, there would be a movement."

Buell and his classmates were thrilled to find out the movement is already happening. After the class finished with the spoken word show at the Bistro, Lewis could tell that some students were ready to delve even deeper into the world of conscious hip-hop. In addition to Buell and Lockhart, Lewis invited Andrew Gibbs and Adam Dew to the University of Chicago to attend a national conference on feminism in hip-hop. From her lectern in one of the university's spacious halls, author and lecturer Yvonne Bynoe made the Willamette students and the rest of her rapt audience aware of crucial race problems in America. The co-founder and former president of the Urban Think Tank and a regular contributor to National Public Radio's News and Notes with Ed Gordon, Bynoe says, "The reality is that residential patterns in the United States are largely segregated and as a by-product, schools are largely segregated." Bynoe points out that these isolated communities prevent complete integration. She says: "Actual interaction with people of different cultures, races and beliefs is the best way for people to have more meaningful dialogues about race. Moreover, it is the best way for people to debunk their own misconceptions about people different from themselves. Viewing a music video or buying a CD is no substitution for real life engagement." Little did the students know that real life in Chicago was about to engage them.

After a day's worth of lectures, they headed out to 55th Street for a convenience store run. When the shop-fronts go dark and the streetlights switch on in Chicago's South Side, four clean-cut young people wealthy enough to pay \$35,000 per year for college aren't welcome. A V6 engine revved up behind them, tires squealed, and a vehicle peeled out. A car veered toward the curb and the backseat window closest to the sidewalk rolled down. A young black man stuck his head out of the car, yelling, "Watch yo" asses, crackers! You're on the South Side!"

But the sting of the prejudice they encountered in Chicago only reaffirmed the students' resolve to effect positive change back home. When they returned to school, the students, led by Gibbs, searched out a way to get involved with the movement for conscious hip-hop and discovered the Hip-Hop Congress, a national network of socially conscious college and high school student groups. Gibbs decided to found the Willamette chapter of the Congress to bring conscious

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hip-hop's message of equality and integration home to Oregon. Now head of the Willamette chapter of the Congress, Gibbs reflects on the drive-by slur in Chicago, saying, "To them, we were just rich kids."

Sitting outside the Bistro, the birthplace of Willamette University's Hip-Hop Congress, members of the group joke, "There's no other group on campus that looks like us." Clockwise from top-left: Darick Dang, Ryu Orriya, Maggie Wilkens, Cenile Verveth, Jason Gundlack, Adam Dew, Austin Buell, Tristan Lockhart, Colin Waite, Andrew Gibbs, Malcolm McClarron.

The fact that Lockhart is black did not prevent those in the car from calling the four guys "crackers." But, Gibbs says: "If we all sat down and chilled, they'd find out that Austin, a white kid from Ashland, Oregon, probably knows more about underground hip-hop than they do. If we sat down, we'd be able to have that conversation."

Willamette's chapter of the Congress is getting that very conversation started. Members include male, female, black, white, Asian-American, and Hispanic students. Buell says that the Congress' diverse membership can be attributed to the universality of conscious hip-hop's message. "The kids coming up in this generation, of all races, deal with the lack of economic and educational opportunity," he says. "Hopefully, hip-hop can bring people together to see that our experiences aren't that different." A typical Congress meeting proves his point. Before they get started on the night's agenda, Gibbs, a white, older non-traditional student from Seattle, lounges in a comfy leather chair in the Montag Student Center. His good friend Lockhart, one of the only black students in the room, relaxes on the couch next to him. Quyen Nguyen, an Asian-American young woman, sits on the arm of Lockhart's chair. The guys joke with a freshman who is there for his first meeting, teasing that his Hispanic background rounds out the Congress's racial mix. Gibbs proudly says, "There's no other club on this campus that looks like us."

In November 2005, a few months after its formation, the Willamette Congress put on its inaugural hip-hop show. The event brought the traditional four elements of hip-hop — rap, break-dancing, DJ spinning, and graffiti — to students more familiar with 50 Cent's criminal record and Lil Jon's bling. As Dew says: "We dispel the idea that if there's a hip-hop show, there's going to be a fight. We're letting people know what else is out there." At the show, a few hundred students crowded into the tiny theater in the student union, craning their necks to see the graffiti murals and MC battles between Willamette students and Salem-area amateurs. The b-boy battle made the crowd go crazy as break-dancers showed off the gravity-defying spins of an ice dancer and the sheer strength of a linebacker. Unexpected Arrival, the headliner MC/DJ of the show, played mostly conscious hip-hop, but he also paid attention to the audience's

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demands for Kanye West's top-selling hit single, "Gold Digger." Appeasing the crowd, those on the dance floor cheered and sang along with every word until the chorus:

Now I ain't saying she's no gold-digger/

But she ain't messing with no broke niggaz/

In radio play, the word "niggaz" is edited out. At the show, the audience didn't know how to handle their favorite song. Lockhart saw some people censor themselves, afraid to stir up trouble. Others glanced uncomfortably in his direction, worried, seemingly, about saying the word aloud in front of a black guy. Lockhart laughs at their political correctness, pleased that the show had brought them into contact with something new.

The Congress is not the only group spreading the word about conscious hip-hop. In July, members of the Willamette Congress plan to get involved with the national movement at the 2006 National Hip-Hop Political Convention. Shamako Noble, the co-founder of the Hip-Hop Congress, will be a keynote speaker, and the Willamette students can't wait to meet the man whose ideas guide the Congress on a national level. Thousands of delegates from all over the country will develop a political platform, focusing on healthcare, educational empowerment, and criminal and economic justice. Convention spokesman Jay Woodson predicts, "As the National Hip-Hop Political Convention voting blocs grow, our leverage will grow."

But, as some advocates of conscious hip-hop warn, top-down politics can only go so far in organizing the hip-hop generation. Before writing for AllHipHop.com, Reggie Legend experienced the grassroots power of hip-hop while working as a youth coordinator for an "out-of-school" program in Chicago. His program targeted young men who dropped out of high school or could not afford higher education. "These young men weren't living with a thug mentality," Legend says. "They were intelligent, thought-provoking young men who were put in an environment with not a lot of resources." One option available to them as a creative outlet is hip-hop. But, as Legend points out, this resource becomes a curse when the medium of hip-hop only delivers negative messages. "They didn't know what options they had outside of what they see in their daily lives and what's on TV," Legend says. "Young men who grew up in places like that think, 'This is all that I can do. These are all my options, and the options are very, very limited.'" Legend believes that conscious hip-hop can help deconstruct these low expectations, shining a beacon of light toward inner city living and bringing both its problems and opportunities into sharper focus.

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Although he sings the praises of conscious hip-hop, Legend also calls for a reality check, asserting that the commercial focus of the hip-hop industry will not be easy to redirect. He says, "Individually, if I don't buy gangster rap albums it doesn't hurt the artist at all." How could it when artists such as 50 Cent sell more than a million albums in less than a week? "But collectively, if we say enough is enough, the audience is what's going to change the direction of hip-hop." The music industry already sees the audience making a difference as 50 Cent's album, *The Massacre*, slipped to eleventh place and Common's new conscious hip-hop album, *Be*, soared to second place in sales in January 2006. "Now when I find out that there are people who think just like me, and they say 'Fight on, keep doing what you're doing because I thought I was alone too.'"

The stakes in the battle for the soul of hip-hop are high, and its outcome depends on commercial success. Legend says that the majority of hip-hop lyrics still send negative messages, warning, "As long as there is money to be made off of it, I see the hip-hop industry continuing to spiral downward." Conscious hip-hop is still the David of the hip-hop industry next to gangsta and pop hip-hop's Goliath. But if the Willamette Congress is any indication, conscious hip-hoppers may have reason to hope. In just a year's time, the audience for the Congress' shows has grown exponentially — from the uninterested few at the Bistro to the hundreds that showed up for their first event. Over 500 more people attended their Conscious Overdose show on April 21, 2006. Of the 750 people in attendance, about 300 were not Willamette students and traveled to the event at the largest facility on Willamette's campus, the Cone Field House.

On a national level, the year 2006 will also be important for conscious hip-hop. As the pivotal November 2006 Congressional elections near, the National Hip-Hop Political Convention continues to develop voter blocs of hip-hop generation Americans. Conscious hip-hop has the potential to rally young Americans into a unified front against the political, social, and racial challenges faced by their generation.

America, listen up, because the hip-hop generation has a lot more to say.